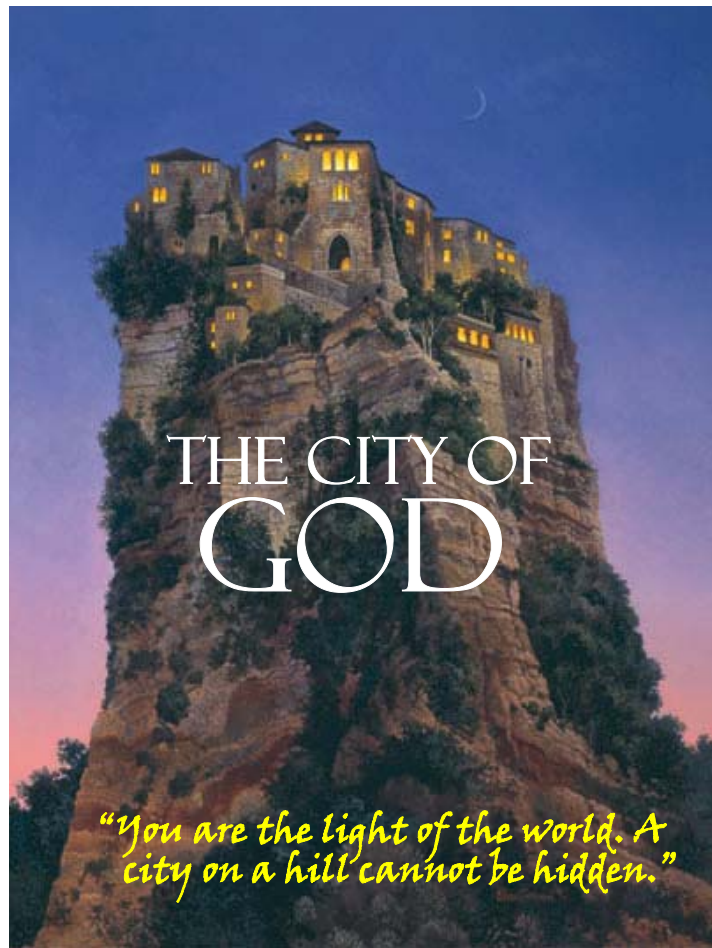


*The Covenant Pulpit*



**"The City of the King"**

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One of the greatest stories ever written is *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes. If you've not read it, perhaps you saw its Broadway adaptation: *The Man of La Mancha*. I'll bet you heard its hit song: *The Impossible Dream*. Cervantes' classic story captures the human longing for transformation.

Don Quixote is an old dreamer immersed in tales of knighthood and chivalry. Finally, he abandons himself to his fantasies. Imagining himself to be a knight, he adorns himself in a rusty old sword and battered armor, and rides off on a broken-down nag. His fat servant Sanchez chases behind, sure that his master has lost his mind. Quixote cuts a comical figure as he charges across fields, attacking windmills he imagines to be dragons.

The laughable pair arrives at a roadside inn. Quixote imagines it to be a great castle. He spies Aldonza, a coarse serving wench who makes money on the side as a prostitute. But to him she is the lady of the Castle. He bows, calling her "sweet lady" and "fair virgin." The mule drivers in the tavern laugh at this crazy old man. With coarse jests and crude jokes, they tell him that the lady is a tramp. But he insists on calling her Dulcinea, which means "the sweet one." Aldonza is hardly sweet. She spits back curses and calls Don Quixote a lunatic for imagining her to be anything more than a whore.

Later Quixote comes to Aldonza's rescue when the mule drivers abuse her. In that moment, the old lunatic *does* become her knight in shining armor. The more he treats her like a lady, the more Aldonza begins to dream that she could be one. But dreams are too often crushed by harsh reality. Later the muleteers haul Aldonza off to a dark place where they ravish her without mercy. She drags broken body and soul back to the inn.

Quixote and Sanchez also return, having been beaten and robbed of everything by a band of cutthroats. A disillusioned Aldonza bitterly repudiates the old man's idealistic dreams, and he finally sees himself as a defeated and pathetic clown. He trudges back home, where he lies down to die of a broken heart. As the lights dim, a woman glides softly to his bed. She carries herself with the dignity of a great lady. As Quixote peers into the darkness, he sees in her a faint memory of a stable girl he once knew. With gentle voice she whispers to the old man, "My name is Dulcinea."

The impossible dream has come true: Aldonza the whore has been transformed into Dulcinea the lady. Do you see the gospel in Cervantes' story? Just as Romans saw Jesus as a lunatic, many today still repudiate his vision as an impossible dream. But those of us who have been transformed by Jesus and his gospel know that nothing is impossible.

Napoleon Bonaparte said, "Imagination rules the world." At the funeral of Bobby Kennedy in 1968, his brother Edward echoed the words of George Bernard Shaw: "Some men see things as they are and ask, 'Why?' I dream things that never were and say, 'Why not?'" Chuck Colson writes in his book, *Against the Night*, "Men and women live and die for ideas, images, and visions." The British philosopher, Edmund Burk called it "the power of moral imagination." St. Augustine's *City of God* is a dream of a better world birthed out of the rubble of a collapsing world. Toward the end of his masterpiece, Augustine points us to the book of Revelation. This is our fourth and final principle in this vision of the *City of God*:

**If the world is to be transformed,  
we must possess a vision that transcends.**

St. Paul described the people of this world as unimaginatively-dull. He writes in Philippians 3:19, "...their god is their stomach...their mind is on earthly things." In other words, they're fixated on their appetites. They sacrifice tomorrow's dreams for today's desires, as if the here-and-now is all there is. Pandering politicians spout platitudes about "change" while sacrificing our children's future on the altar of immediate gratification. Instead of real change, the cultural elite recycle failed strategies from the past. Sadly, their imaginations are much too small. But Philippians 3:20 says that we are citizens of heaven with access to its grand imaginations.

When Rome fell on August 24, 410, Christians focused on ruins left by barbarians, economic collapse, the unraveling of law and order, and the specter of the Dark Ages. Sadly, their minds were on earthly things.

Augustine wrote his *City of God* as a vision that transcended the "now" and dreams of a better world. For the next millennium, his dream inspired Christians to birth a great new civilization out of the chaos. Such is the power of imagination. Russell Kirk wrote, "Without moral imagination, man would live merely from day to day, or moment to moment, as dogs do..."

The barbarians are at our gates as surely as they were at Rome's in 410 AD. If we are going to go from being terrified to transforming, we must have a vision that transcends. I call it "the power of *transcendent* imagination." Like St. John we have to see what lesser imaginations cannot see:

**1. We have to see beyond *false* reality.**

St. John was a religious prisoner on the Island of Patmos, a penal colony in the Roman gulag. The anti-Christ of his day was the Emperor Domitian.

He had unleashed a horrific persecution to annihilate Christianity. Every Apostle had been martyred except for John who was in his 90s. Humanly-speaking, the church was hanging by a slender thread. That's what old John saw as reality. But the world's last remaining apostle was about to get a vision of *real* reality. Revelation 4:1 shows two things about *false* reality:

### **1) What we see is not always what really is.**

The Greek philosopher Plato said that there is an unseen world more real than the visible world. John writes in Revelation 4:1, "After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven." Where is this heaven? Is it beyond the galaxies? Or is it standing right in front of us, in another dimension? Wherever it is, there are open doorways into *heavenly realms*. Spirit beings pass back and forth between the invisible and visible. In a split second, John passes from Patmos to heaven. He is commanded to come up, and verse two says, "At once I was in the Spirit..."

Verse one begins with those words, "After this I looked..." The original Greek could be translated, "I looked again..." or "I took another look..." Sometimes we have to take a fresh look at things. We are too quick to believe what we see and hear. We need to see beyond shallow arguments, media spin, and statistics that sell lies. Sometimes economic experts, political pundits, scientists, and Ivy League intellectuals really don't have a clue. Heaven opens a door to those who are willing to look beyond surface reality.

What we see is not always what really is. On earth St. John sits in chains. But what he sees from his vantage point on Patmos is not real reality. There is another reality in heavenly realms that is far more significant. From his great White Palace on the Adriatic coast, Domitian makes his proclamations. But on the Great White Throne in heaven sits an infinitely-greater King who moves human kings and kingdoms like pawns on a chessboard. Roman armies march and the earth trembles. But in invisible realms millions of angels move with stealth to carry out the commands of the King of kings. What happens there is far more important reality than who the president-elect chooses to be on his new cabinet or what happens in the stock market.

### **2) What is now is not always what will be.**

The voice in verse one concludes, "...I will show you what must take place after this." Nothing ever remains the same. No matter what is going on now, something new "...must take place after this..." John's Revelation teaches us that history moves inexorably toward a future conclusion that

was preordained before time began. Today Domitian is on the throne, and John is in prison. Within a few months, Domitian will be assassinated in a palace coup and John will be set free to go back to his church in Ephesus.

In John's day, Rome builds cities, paves highways, and conquers nations. Two thousand years later, buses will bring thousands of camera-totting tourists to poke through the ruins of their cities. In John's day, Domitian unleashes a worldwide persecution to eliminate the Christian faith. Two thousand years later he lays buried in the dustbin of forgotten history, and 2.5 billion Christians worship a Resurrected Jew who was crucified by Rome.

Why are we caught up in the turmoil of today? Why are we so fixated on the machinations in Washington DC? January 20<sup>th</sup> will witness the 42<sup>nd</sup> such regime change at the White House. A new thing must always "take place after this." These are exciting times for those who know that the pieces are falling in place for the return of our Lord. What we see is not always what really is; what is now is not always what will be.

## **2. We have to see *real* reality.**

Verse three continues, "At once I was in the Spirit, and there was before me a throne in heaven." What John sees in heaven is more real than what he sees on Patmos. This is the vision that should stir our imaginations:

### **1) Majesty enthroned on high**

The first thing old John sees in verse three is "a throne in heaven and someone sitting on it." Things in John's world seem to be spinning out of control. Evil triumphs and the good guys are being fed to the lions. But in the *heavenly realms* someone sits on a throne. He isn't pacing back and forth, wringing His hands in despair, wondering how he's going to put *Humpty Dumpty* back together again. He sits in sovereign control and calmness. In verse five "flashes of lightening, rumblings, and peals of thunder" come from that throne. The King of kings might be relaxed, but he's not passive. This is the God who thunders and the world of Noah's day is swept away in a flood. But verse three says "a rainbow resembling an emerald encircles the throne." This is the God, who after destroying the earth with a flood, makes all things new again and sets a rainbow as a covenant sign that we have nothing to fear in any future destruction of the world. He has promised to make an earth as a paradise for those of us who belong to the *City of God*.

Verse six says that "...before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal." On that crystal sea are the twenty-four elders of verse four, representing the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 Apostles. This is the *City of God*; the *Ecclesia*; the people of God. Though there are storms of chaos all around them, they sit on a sea as smooth as glass. Before the throne there is peace. Verse four says that these citizens of the *City of God* wear crowns. We are kings ruling with a king. All around us political, economic, and cultural storms rage, but we are on a crystal sea of peace and calm before our Sovereign King of kings.

## 2) Creation in submission to its Creator

Verse six goes on to say, "In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures." One looks like a lion, the second an ox, the fourth has the face of a man, and the fourth flies like an eagle. Who are these exotic winged creatures whose bodies are covered all over with eyes? In Jewish numerology, the number four stands for creation. The ancients spoke of the four corners of the earth. In Jewish thinking, the four winged beings represent all the creatures of the earth: the lion is the noblest; the ox is the strongest; the eagle is the swiftest; and man is the wisest. All of creation praises God. Psalm 19:1&2 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God. Day after day they utter their praise..." Verse 8 says of the earth's creatures: "Day and night they never stop saying, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty who was and is and is to come.'" They're covered with eyes to tell us that the design of creation provides millions of eyes through which we can see the Master Designer.

These creatures that represent creation are winged to fly at his slightest command. Read the prophecies of Scripture. As time moves closer to the Second Coming of our Savior, all creation will rise up against the wickedness of men at God's command: volcanoes, earthquakes, falling asteroids, rising seas, melting polar ice caps, famines, plagues. For all of our technological advances, humankind will not be able to stop the eruptions unleashed by a planet that has been abused by greed. Paul says of humankind in Romans 1:25, "...they worshipped the creation rather than the Creator..." We have seen our creation and its resources—oil, gold, water, crops, and other commodities—as the source of our sustenance, rather than God. Evolutions proclaim that the earth is our creator. Eco-pagans worship her as our *Mother Earth*. As a result of our misuse of creation, we are turning paradise into an ecological nightmare. But creation knows who her God is, and she will rise up in judgment. And the creation that groans for redemption will be made new again into an eternal paradise for the *City of God* and its citizens.

### 3) A church with a King

Verse ten says, "The Twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever." This is the church; the *City of God*. Worship is its highest priority and passion. Its citizens lay their crowns before him to show that he is the Only King. He alone is worthy "...to receive glory, and honor, and power..." Heavenly citizenship takes precedence over national identity. We swear first allegiance to the King of heaven, not the flag of America. We who belong to the King of kings will not put our trust in politicians or political parties. Our hope is not in the hands of *Wall Street*, or the Social Security System, or Medicare, or any other government entitlements. We will move on, even if the Big Three Auto Companies fail. The *City of God* is not dependent on the economies of men. We will not abandon our children to be shaped by the cities of men. The Bible, and not the cultural elite or the Hollywood media, shapes our moral values. On orders from our King we will take the gospel to every person in the world, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, tend the sick, care for the widow and orphan, visit the prisoner, and befriend the lonely. With such moral imagination we will advance the vision of the City of the King.

### 4) The Lord who controls history

Revelation 5:1 says, "Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals." The angels cry out, "Who is worthy to open the scroll?" But no one is worthy. Then, in verse four old John begins to weep uncontrollably. What is this strange scroll that causes such consternation in heaven? In ancient Babylon, Daniel had a vision of the future world empires that would conquer the world. With amazing accuracy he predicted the rise of Persia, Greece, and Rome. Some 600 years before John, he predicted the exact day that Jesus would enter Jerusalem. Almost 2600 years ago he speaks with startling insight about events that shape our world today. Then he sees beyond to things that will happen just before Jesus comes again. But, before Daniel can reveal the very last days, the scroll of future history is rolled up and sealed by God. The final end is left shrouded in mystery.

This is the scroll talked about in Revelation Five. How will history end? One of the elders says to St. John in verse five, "Do not weep! See the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals." Jesus controls the past, present, and future. History is *His* story. It is not Barak Obama, George Bush, the global

economy, or Islamic terrorists who will determine history. The changing events in world history are pieces of a cosmic puzzle falling into place for the signature event in history: the coming of the King. May God help the church not to become so earthly-minded that we lose the transcendent vision of the Second Coming of our Lord!

### **5) Angelic Armies of awesome power**

Perhaps we live in times more frightening than those of John the Apostle. Global economies are on a dizzying downward slide. Iran builds nuclear capabilities and Israel rattles its sabers in response. China is building a military power that dwarfs anything the world has ever seen. A nuclear-armed Pakistan is in danger of a militant Islamic takeover. The Russian Bear rises from the rubble of Communism. Hindu mobs in India burn Christian churches. Raul Castro arrests pastors in Cuba. Homosexual mobs march on churches in California. There is a rising and pervasive evil that could distract us from our vision. But, like John, we see a door open in heaven. This is what he saw in Revelation 5:11: "Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels...ten thousand times ten thousand encircling the throne..." That's literally 100 million angels, each one indestructible. If you reckon the number according to Jewish symbolism, the angels number infinitely more than 100 million. This is the army that defends the *City of God*. The power at our disposal is beyond imagination! This is *real* reality—more real than anything we hear on CNN or Fox News or talk radio. Because we have looked into heaven, we will not fear or be dissuaded from our mission.

### **6) Christians who live with certainty**

How then do we citizens of the *City of God* live as everything around us crumbles? We who have looked into the transcendent vision of heaven must respond as they do in Revelation 5:14: "The four living creatures said, 'Amen!' and the elders fell down and worshipped." The old Hebrew word "amen" means "So be it!" or "Let it be!" It is a positive affirmation that what was said is so real and true that it will happen—no matter what! Our impossible dream is not impossible after all! Transformation is on the way! This is the power of moral imagination from the throne of God itself. All we can do is fall down and worship the God who sits on the throne. Then we pick ourselves up from our worship and go out spreading the news: Jesus is coming again! His kingdom is at hand! Come quickly into the *City of God*!